



Associate Professor Teresa Franqueira
University of Aveiro. Cumulus Association

Teresa Franqueira is an Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro and holds a PhD from Politecnico di Milano. She is the Vice-President and Executive Board Member of Cumulus Association and was International Coordinator of the DESIS Network (2022–2025). She directed the Design Factory Aveiro from 2016 till 2022. Teresa sits on editorial boards, scientific committees, and juries of international design competitions. She teaches in Europe and Asia, coordinates European projects, and is frequently invited as a keynote speaker. Her research focuses on design for social innovation, sustainability, product and service design, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration for positive change.

Women in Design: A Journey Between Invisibilities and Affirmations

Associate Professor Teresa Franqueira

Abstract

This article reflects on the intersection between gender experience and design practice, tracing a personal journey through engineering, architecture, industrial design, teaching, research, and leadership. It argues that the gender lens — marked by a constant yet often invisible presence — is not a biographical detail, but a critical factor that shapes challenges and opportunities in the field of Design. Through a first-person account, persistent barriers and paradoxes in academic and professional contexts are identified, concluding that gender equity is a fundamental pillar for the creation of truly inclusive and innovative design ecosystems.

Introduction

Design, as a discipline, has historically developed anchored in academic traditions associated with the fine arts, architecture, and engineering—domains where the female presence, although real and significant, has remained systematically invisible. Consequently, the canonical narratives of design history still, to this day, lack consistent representations of female trajectories, be it in education, professional practice, research, or leadership.

This text contributes to the debate on this gap by drawing on a personal experience that spans different roles—student, design

professional, teacher, researcher, and manager. The objective is twofold: to highlight the challenges and achievements that mark the journey of women in design, and to reflect on how this singular perspective informs and enriches the practice of Design. Ultimately, the struggle for equity within the discipline is both a mirror of and a precondition for the ambition to create equitable and inclusive solutions for society.

Academic Training: Persistent Disparities

I studied mechanical engineering in the late 1980s, and this first experience in higher education offered an initial contact with gender inequality: in a cohort of 160 students, there were only 10 women. Nearly four decades later, despite undeniable progress, statistics continue to reveal significant imbalances in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) areas. Subsequently, I enrolled in architecture, where parity among students was greater, but the inequality reappeared in the teaching staff: there was not a single woman teaching design studio (architecture). The same pattern replicated itself in the design course. Although the proportion of women in the cohort was significantly higher than that of men, design studio teaching remained an exclusively male domain. Throughout my entire design education, I never had a female design studio professor.

This absence shapes not only pathways but also aspirations. Upon retrospectively analysing the professional trajectories of my peers, a clear trend is observed: men more frequently occupied prominent positions in the design job market and in teaching the discipline within higher education institutions, while many women moved

towards teaching visual arts in secondary education or left the field altogether. Cases of women who founded companies or assumed leadership roles in the private sector were rare. The absence of female role models creates a cycle of invisibility that is difficult to break.

Professional Practice: Gender Challenges on the Shop Floor

Entering the job market, with my own design studio and as an industrial designer meant immersion in strongly male-dominated contexts, such as the shop floor and the management of production processes. There, the presence of a woman was often met with distrust, requiring an additional effort to legitimise technical competencies.

Although integration was ultimately successful, it is evident that initial acceptance would have been more immediate for a man. This experience illustrates how gender stereotypes continue to condition perceptions of competence and authority in technical areas, a bias that every designer must recognise to avoid replicating unintentional exclusions in their own practice.

Teaching and Institutional Leadership: The Paradox of Representation

An academic teaching career, developed over more than 25 years, has allowed me to observe significant advances in female presence among students—in Portugal, in 2022, approximately 61% of higher education graduates were women. However, this numerical predominance is not reflected in the composition of the teaching staff, particularly in design studio areas.

In my current experience, in a group of 15 design studio teachers, I am the only woman. This discrepancy, which echoes my own experience as a student, extends to other study cycles and design courses, revealing a persistent academic glass ceiling.

The presence of women in academic management and leadership roles also faces resistance. Throughout my career, I have held roles such as degree director or director of a design-driven innovation centre (Design Factory Aveiro), among others. These positions required, in addition to the inherent competencies of the role, an additional effort of affirmation, especially in contexts external to design, where female leadership is still often met with surprise. This paradox is symptomatic: women lead in the number of graduates but remain under-represented in positions of power and decision-making.

Research: A Space of Greater Equity?

The research experience, particularly during my doctorate in Italy at one of the largest design schools in the world, was marked by strong female leadership. This reality provided a notably more equitable context, contrasting with the asymmetries experienced previously and demonstrating that diverse environments are not only possible but also highly productive.

Research in design for social innovation and sustainability, the area in which I work, tends to show a greater gender balance. However, upon returning to my home university, I faced resistance in legitimising the topic. As it was an emerging field, introduced by a woman, some proposals were often met with less attention or even

scepticism. Scientific authority ultimately prevailed, but it required extra effort. Innovation, when proposed by voices outside the traditional canon, struggles to be heard.

Final Considerations

In revisiting my journey, I conclude that being a woman in design has implied a continuous, additional effort of affirmation. At various moments, the validation of my competencies and achievements may have been conditioned by persistent gender perceptions, albeit in more subtle and sometimes unconscious ways.

If I had to summarise this trajectory, I would say it was marked by significant advances, but also by silent obstacles, which required resilience and persistence. I am convinced that if I were a man, the path would have been more linear. This experience, however, is also a source of unique insight. The lens of invisibility trains us to see what others do not see, to listen to the unheard voices, and to challenge established norms. It is precisely this sensitivity that is at the heart of Design for All. The struggle for equity within our discipline is part of its essence. Only a diverse, inclusive, and equitable design community can aspire to create a world that is also diverse, inclusive, and equitable. Sharing these experiences is, therefore, an act of design in itself: it is to prototype a more inclusive future for the profession and for the society it serves.



Dr Rachelle Viader Knowles PFHEA

**Head of International for Arts and Humanities, and
Reader in Creative Practice, Manchester Metropolitan
University, UK**

I lead the strategic development of global engagement across a large faculty that includes the Manchester School of Art, my academic home. A pioneer of collaborative online international learning (COIL) in the creative arts since the early 2000's, my scholarly interests in 'translocal dialogues' combine my background as a creative researcher, and my experience in international educational leadership and curriculum design. I hold a PhD in Art+Media from Plymouth University in the UK, an MFA in Visual Arts from the University of Windsor in Canada, and a BA (Hons) Interactive Arts from the University of Wales. I am a member of the International Advisory Board for the School of Arts and Design at Woxsen University in India, and a Principal Fellow of Advance HE.

Leading with COIL: Towards Translocal Education in Art and Design

Dr Rachelle Viader Knowles

Abstract

This reflective paper traces shifts in my thinking over two decades of practice and leadership in collaborative online international learning (COIL). Beginning with early intermedia art projects at the University of Regina in Canada, the narrative follows the evolution of my academic practice exploring translocal pedagogies that connect students across borders through shared creative inquiry. Drawing on practitioner experience and practice-based research, the paper introduces a framework of 'translocal dialogues' and showcases projects addressing global challenges such as vaccine hesitancy. The paper culminates in current strategic work at Manchester Metropolitan University, embedding COIL within transnational education (TNE) and reimagining TNE as translocal education (TLE) in partnership with The British University in Egypt. Addressing COIL within art and design education as a critical pedagogy for fostering global citizenship and inclusive learning, we aim towards a model for sector-wide innovation in internationalised higher education.

***Keywords:* Transnational Education, Translocal Education, Design Education COIL, Translocal Dialogues**

Introduction

I am grateful for this opportunity to set out my practice and leadership in COIL over the last twenty years, and to 'think out loud' in a personal, reflective and reflexive voice. This paper provides an overview of key problems, projects, ideas and underpinnings I have worked through over the years, in line with the brief to share a personal narrative and a professional journey of significance to design, and in this case specifically to design education and curriculum design in higher education. I have approached this article in three parts. The Start outlines how I found my way to developing innovative curriculum-based teaching projects that connect students with counterparts in other countries. The Middle provides the theoretical frameworks and ways of working that have informed my practice. The Now gives insight into the strategy I am leading, how this is being deployed through an example of innovative practice in the design curriculum within the Manchester School of Art as part of a transnational education (TNE) partnership, and the next steps we aim to achieve, rethinking TNE as TLE, translocal education.

The Start

In 2002, I accepted my first academic post, leading the area of intermedia in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Regina in the Canadian prairies. Originally from the UK where I am now based again, I had already lived in Ontario for six years by the time I moved to Regina, however the context of the province of Saskatchewan brought considerable new richness to my understanding of Canada. Specifically, teaching students from farming backgrounds and Indigenous students from First Nations

and Metis communities reshaped my thinking and were foundational to practice as an educator.

The subject area of intermedia art offers broad scope for experimental pedagogies, enabled by the flexibilities of the Canadian curriculum. I started conceptualising and designing a series of increasingly ambitious teaching and learning projects that connected my students through shared briefs and technologies such as Skype, Facebook and bespoke online interface designs, with counterparts in institutions around the world including the UK, the Netherland, Serbia, Finland and Turkey. I forged a collaboration with colleague Dr Kathleen Irwin, Professor of Scenography who published on these projects as examples of “telematic performance” (Irwin, 2011), long before either of us was introduced to the concept of ‘collaborative online international learning’, or COIL, the term I now align with.

Explaining the impulse I felt to bring global connectivity into the studio, I used to focus on the fact that I taught some students who had never seen an ocean. Twenty years later, in the context of environmental crisis and a deeper understanding of global positionality thanks to Dr Karen Pashby, Professor of Global Citizenship Education at Manchester Met, my thinking has significantly changed. We are all equally ‘in the world’ and it is our responsibility as educators to design curriculum that challenges deficit models of margins and centres and instead celebrates and shares the diversity of localised knowledge, heritage, culture and experience.

The Middle

Though a practice-based PhD, “A Translocal Approach to Dialogue-based Art” (Knowles, 2017) I developed a methodologic framework I call ‘translocal dialogues’ that underpins my practice, as an educator, creative scholar and academic leader. The findings of my research were a set of ten characteristics of translocal dialogue-based practice, tested through a project called VacZineNations, a design brief undertaken by students in the UK, China and Canada. Together, they shared their outcomes addressing a question of how design can contribute to challenging vaccine hesitancy (Knowles, et al. 2020). This project was showcased as part of Immune Nations at UNAids in Geneva, Gallery KiT in Trondheim, Norway and McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, Canada (Loveless, 2022). The project was prescient given the global COVID-19 pandemic that would unfold three years later. It anticipated critical conversations regarding vaccine availability and the rise of the anti-vaxxers, but also the global pivot to online delivery in higher education. This switch normalised online practice and therefore removed the real and perceived technical and practical barriers that had previously limited the take-up of COIL.

Environmental crisis and the pandemic, both pertinent examples of wicked problems that no one discipline, or nation, can solve unilaterally, trigger consideration for teaching design as a transdisciplinary nexus that requires a multiplicity of geographic and cultural perspectives. I suggest that encounters with teaching and learning through the pedagogy of COIL can provide that multiplicity of perspectives within a context that Kudo et al. (2020) have termed ‘the space for translocal learning.’

The Now

At Manchester Metropolitan University, I have led a strategic commitment to provide internationalised opportunities for all our students. My vision is to utilise critical pedagogies such as COIL to ensure that students who might not have the possibility to participate in international mobility also have access to the career enhancement and cultural learning that global engagement brings. In Arts and Humanities, I work closely with two colleagues to progress this initiative. Dr Benedicte Brahic from the School of Sociology and Criminology is leading the development of a critical-evaluative framework to demonstrate the impact of COIL 'in-pact' with students (Knowles et al. 2025), emphasising the solidarity and connectivity we want these projects to bring to learners across borders through collaborative learning addressing critical challenges. Rachel Kelly from the Manchester School of Art is leading ethical COIL design and academic practitioner experience, developing best-practice guidelines for reflexive and decolonised practice and scholarship, empowering academics to co-create contextually relevant, translocal, sustainable and equitable joint teaching initiatives.

Our mission is also to embed COIL within our transnational education (TNE) partnerships. We are currently designing projects with our partner The British University in Egypt (BUE) who deliver six dual-award programmes in art and design. Led by Rachel Kelly and Patti Crozier from the Manchester School of Art, and Suada Tivari and Professor Iman Gawad at BUE, our proposed projects bridge outwards from our institutions to collaborate with local communities in Egypt and the UK. For example, fashion and textiles

design students in both countries will work with Egyptian 'Tally' embroidery artisans, participate in online workshops, and co-design collections which will explore cultural preservation and women's economic empowerment.

Through embedding COIL into our TNE approach in art and design, we are rethinking transnational education as translocal education, TLE to foreground equity, diversity and inclusion, and local to local knowledge in our pedagogies. We aim to advance sustainable collaborative academic practice and to share best practices for 'translocal education' in the sector.